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Iran: The Revolutionary Council Takes Charge

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Iran: The Revolutionary Council Takes Charge (U)

Summary

The members of the Revolutionary Council that has assumed governmental authority in Iran at Ayatollah Khomeini's direction are unprepared by background and temperament to run the country effectively.

The Council is dominated by Shia Muslim religious figures who tend to be inflexible on most issues and are more concerned with the general direction of the revolution than with pragmatic, day-to-day concerns. It is, moreover, an informal body, probably faction ridden and receiving only broad direction from Khomeini. As a result, dealing with the government on the hostage issue and other key US concerns is certain to be difficult.

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Khomeini created the Council in February to prepare for his return to Iran from exile. Since March, it has acted as a quasi-legislative body, often interfering in the activities of the regular government. A Council delegation investigating the oil industry in late September, for example, recommended the removal of the existing leadership of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). The subsequent firing of NIOC Chief Hassan Nazih, who had been strongly supported by Prime Minister Bazargan, was a major defeat for the liberal, pragmatic forces in the government.

The membership of the Council has been kept largely secret; there is no fixed membership. Different members of Khomeini's entourage are consulted on different issues, and the Council meets only informally. Khomeini dominates its deliberations and authorizes members of the Council to act in his name. Khomeini's directions apparently are broad in most instances. On the one hand, the Council members have had difficulty in interpreting them, but on the other, the very broadness of the instruction permits the members to pursue their own causes in his name. Khomeini has sometimes overruled other Council members.

Clerical Domination

Although nonclerical figures—including Foreign Minister Yazdi—have been members, religious leaders have dominated the Council from the beginning. Their education is traditional and isolated from modern influences. Most of the Council's members have little regard for the norms of international diplomacy and are not very concerned about Iran's foreign image. The clerical leadership around Khomeini is badly divided and faction ridden. A variety of cliques interact with one another as they try to influence Khomeini. We suspect that the various factions try to outmaneuver one another to gain Khomeini's ear by espousing views that are consistent with Khomeini's own extreme and tightly held views.

Key Figures

After Khomeini, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti probably is the most influential Council member. Beheshti played a key role in organizing the revolution last year and is Secretary General of Khomeini's Islamic Republic Party. US officials who have met Beheshti describe him as an impressive figure who is extremely self-confident. He has been a tough negotiator with other Iranian political groups but somewhat more willing than Khomeini to compromise. Beheshti has complained often about alleged US meddling in Iranian internal affairs—a concern commonly shared by senior Iranian leaders.

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Both Beheshti and Khomeini are convinced that they enjoy the support of the overwhelming mass of Iranians. They are unconcerned by the defection of middle class and intellectual supporters from the revolutionary movement.

Other key religious figures who probably participate in the Council's deliberations include:

- Ayatollah Hasan Lahooti—a leader of the Revolutionary Guards with good access to Khomeini.
- Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani—another leader of the Revolutionary Guards who is closely associated with revolutionary court and committee systems.
- Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani—former Deputy Interior Minister in the Bazargan government.
- Ayatollah Montazari—a hardliner with close ties to radical Arabs.
- Khomeini's son Ahmad, who is playing a major role in the hostage situation at the US Embassy.

Influential nonclerical figures include Yazdi and Defense Minister Chamran. Khomeini has asked them and most other ministers to stay at their posts. Chamran is close to Shia leaders in Lebanon and apparently has close ties to Khomeini. Several figures who were with Khomeini in France are probably involved in the Council's debates, including Sadeq Ghotbzadeh and Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, both of whom are generally regarded as extremists with little concern for practical politics.

Implications

The assumption of power by the Revolutionary Council has moved Khomeini even more directly into overall leadership of Iran. He no longer even has to consider the views of moderates like Bazargan, and pragmatic policy recommendations are less likely to be presented to Khomeini. Relative moderates like Yazdi will be more vulnerable to extremist pressures. Decisionmaking is likely to become more arbitrary.

At the same time, Iran's policies will be more chaotic and confused. Neither Khomeini nor the key members of his entourage are prepared to run the country effectively. They are far more concerned with creating their ideal Islamic Republic than with the mechanics of governing. The assassination of several major religious figures in the last six months—some of whom were Council members—has doubtless heightened this group's anxiety.

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Both in the short term in dealing with the hostage situation and over the long run as the Council creates its Islamic theocracy, dealing with Iran will be difficult and frustrating. All decisions by Iran's leaders will be heavily influenced by concern for Islamic doctrine and difficult for Westerners to comprehend. Iran is likely to become increasingly isolated from the outside world.

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Denied

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